The abstract in the poetics of Nilamoni Phukan: 
A study

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Introduction
Poetry and Painting
Of all the genres of literatures, poetry is considered to be the most intact and influential, though it fails to shed direct impact in the minds of the illiterates. However, the visual paintings do have the capability to impact upon the minds of man and the animal kingdom alike. Essentially, both of them belong to the category of the abstract, having an apparent concrete form too. Like the letters and the words to the body of a poem, the paintings and the sculptures display a perceptible form expressed through lines and colours.

In his prose, Nilamoni Phukan, the poet, analyses the historical basis of poetry, painting and sculptures (Phukan, 2013). He endeavors to express feelings and understandings of several painters and sculptors through his medium of poetry. Moreover, he cultivates Assamese terminology of certain English words, used in the discourse of paintings and sculptures, which includes pedestal, composition, texture, tone, shape or size, mass, volume, spatial, surface, illusion, distortion, form, spatial relationship, symmetry, contour, contemplation, empathy, plane, solid, spatial fullness etc. This goes to exemplify his mastery over the subject as well. In the history of poetry, various devices like images and symbols are used which are formatively pictorial in nature.

Poetry And Painting: Similarities And Dissimilarities
The body of a poem is visual and audible, though its emotions are worthy to be understood. On the other hand, painting is worth of feeling though it is visual and sensual in nature. Poetry is fit to be heard and it has many imports depending on the variations in the mode of listening. The thoughts embodied in the poetry inspire the imaginations in man. A view of the painting leads the understanding to a certain peak, though it hampers and constrains the imagination in a stage. The medium of poetry is words. The body consisting of words may have a finite limit, though it is infinite in its thoughts. On the contrary, though painting is confined to limits, it has the conjecture of the infinite. There is a difference in the appeal in poetry, painting and sculpture, which has been discussed by the poet in his prose writing. (Phukan, 2013, pp. 33-37)

Poetics of Nilamoni Phukan: Poetry and Painting
Nilamoni Phukan is a poet who delivers the human experiences through the medium of paintings. He has been largely influenced by works of various painters, of which he endeavors to present them pictorially in delineating his own experiences. Therefore, the relationship between painting and his poetics demands a meticulous study and analysis.

The analysis can be directed towards two stages, viz:
1) the relation between painting and his devices,
2) the pictoriality in his poetry.

However, such a distinction is not entirely distinct, because poetry, as a subject, is complex in nature.

Visual Arts and the Poetics of Nilamoni Phukan
Mental activities and their reactions play pivotal role in the creation of poetry and painting. Unlike other forms of art, both of these two forms, as expressed forms, impact upon the neurology of man through his sense organs. The poetic perspectives of Phukan are largely coloured by nature, folk painting, and historical art-sources he came in contact with since his childhood. Pictoriality has turned in to inseparable part of his experiences, which find outlets in his autobiographical memoirs as well.

In an interview he says that his relation with paintings goes back to his school days. (Phukan, 1997, p. 205) He also adds here that he has a nearer relationship with the painters and the sculptors than the poets and the prose writers. He writes ‘You have already confirmed that pictoriality is a salient feature of my poetry.(Phukan, Said to Hiren Gohain, ‘you’ refered here to the Critics, 1997.) Moreover, in certain poems I have used some pictures as images. I have made the forms into images.’(Phukan, 1997, p.199) The same thing he has been said in another context in these words, ‘My interest in painting has inspired me in creating images. I have used enough colour epithets in my poems. My long association with painting is the root cause of the occasional visual quality in my poems. However, I have not forgotten...
that the medium of poetry is language, which cannot carry the intrinsic qualities of colours and lines.’ (Phukan, 1997, p. 130). He has a long-standing association with folk-painting, painting that encompasses from the historical art-forms to the contemporary abstract painting, along with their critical discourses as well. He has written critical appreciations of painting-forms also. He has taken a firm step in introducing Assamese readers with the vision of an art critic can be exhilarating in the transformation of a poet, which he has said thus in another context – ‘Herbert Read, an extra-ordinary visionary exponent, critic and historian of art, is a poet also.’ (Phukan, 1997, p. 201)

Painting and the Poetics of Nilamoni Phukan

His interest in painting is seen to have created special awareness about colour in the formation of his poetry. About the role or the import of colour in painting and poetry, he has written.

Like the words, colours have the same capability to evoke emotions, anxiety, excitement and association. A tune which is otherwise not expressed by words is most probably easy to be captured in colours. Due to this fact, form and colour are probably predominant in modern painting. Lines are almost divorced from painting. The primary and mixed colours of yellow, red, orange, green, blue, brown etc have symbolic meanings and conjectures depending on social time, social place and cultural differences as well. Though not instant in purport, the painter, through the medium of variety and contradiction in colours, for and contrary characters, harmony, light and dark tone, dimension and variations in colours, creates a rhythm which we cannot hear, but understand by the mind. Except images and metaphors, the poet cannot take anything directly from painting...Like a piece of painting, a poem cannot be narrated, but felt. The poetry is emotion-based, the painting is form-based in nature. The form in a poem is born out of emotion, the emotions in painting is born from forms. There is no painting that does not carry any emotion; there is no poem that does not have metaphors and images. (Phukan, 1996, p. 52)

Certain statements that harbor his notions regarding pictures and colours used in his poetics have been quoted –

a) We know that the colour is the most sensuous element in painting. Marc Chagall said that colour is art. The moral crisis in art is always the crisis of colours. (Phukan, 1998, P. 66)

b) The yellow colour is said to be the colour of the Sun and its temperature. (Phukan, 1997, p. 198)

c) Yellow is a favourite colour of the Assamese. It is a vivid colour, of life and symbol of happiness. (Phukan, 1996, p. 43)
d) Yellow appears to be the colour of the mind of the Assamese; It is their body-colour also. They have special fondness for yellow and red. (Phukan, 1987, p. 30)
e) The varied colours, big and small, found in the Gamosa, is the same colour of the blood of man; it is the colour of the emotional life. (Phukan, 1987, p. 32)

He has also written on various symbolic meanings contained in colours:

a) Yellow: Joy, fullness, spirit, serenity, reproduction.

b) Red: blood, sex, sexuality, interest, fertility and excitement.

c) Green: Youth, Life and nature.

d) Red, white, yellow: warding off the evil spirits. (Phukan, 1987, p. 56)

The Elements Of Painting In The Poetry Of Nilamoni Phukan

In several places in the poems of Nilamoni Phukan, there are inclusions of the elements from the paintings, home and abroad, which is a subject of detailed study. Some of the hints of historical paintings found in the poetry of Nilamoni Phukan are as follow:

There is a reference to Nut, or Neuth or Nuit, an Egyptian sky goddess, in the poem ‘Surjiya Heno Nami Ahe Ei Nadiyedi’ (The Sun Is Said To Descend Along This River) which is included in his poetry collection of the same title. This Goddess, studded with stars in her nude body, keeps herself away from the Earth during the day and touches Earth, the God, at night with her one hand and one leg, like a cow. Due to this association, Nut gave birth to Orisis, Aaisi, Chet and Nephtthis, her sons. According to Plutarch, Aruwesis is the fifth son of Nut who is considered to be at par with Apollo, the Greek God. Her duty was to guard Ra or the Sun God and help his movement through the sky. The Egyptians believed that due to the daily association with Nut, the Sun could move through her body as soon as the Sun set in the sky and appeared the next day. She is said to be the mother of the Sun as she guards him. The Egyptians used to draw pictures of this Goddess upon the coffin boxes, which were to be placed with mummies in the pyramids. It was a way, they thought, to be the cause of the re-birth of the dead’ (Leicht, P.135). The poet has written about his encounter with this portrait (Phukan, 2012, pp. 160-61).

‘Janma’, another poem from the same collection, has reference to a legendary Egyptian phoenix, which is related to re-birth also. Like Sita in the Ramayana or Draupadi
in the Mahabharata, the phoenix got re-birth from a live fire (Anywhere). In such a situation, it is very hard to analyze the thought embodied in a poem. The poet writes

“There is modulation in voice, but the thought is the same, like the opening of the petals of a flower (Phukan, 2012, pp. 175).

In poem number 20, of the same collection, there is allusion to Padmapani, a Bodhiswatta. This poem hints at the wall paintings found at Ajanta Caves in Maharashtra. The painting of Padmapani Bodhisattva at the first cave at Ajanata is one of the most famous paintings of ancient India. Here Buddha has an unusual serenity on his face and he is perceived in a deep meditative mode if light is cast from the front. The face takes a serene and slight smiling mode if the light is allowed to come from one side. It take a compassionate look if light comes from the opposite direction. This poem embodies the concept of Moksha of Buddhist philosophy because along with the flock of cranes called Uddin in conception, the poet writes 'when I am no longer I am'. It has hints towards the transcendental state. In poem number 32 of the same collection, there is reference to a seven layered throne of life of Amoli ghar. Apparently, the throne does not have any relation with the painting. However, the painting drawn by Hengul and Haital upon the body of the throne cannot be ignored. It can be termed as a historical painting; it can be called a folk one for its evolution.

In poem number 13 of the same collection, there is an appreciation for Anna Reisenberg when he writes as you do have ten hands. The impression of the ten-armed Durga painted here is full of pictorial quality.

In poem number 16 entitled Let us go out, there is reference to Mexican artist Orezko’s painting named Christ destroying his Cross, as he writes stood up an indomitable Christ while breaking the Cross. Again he writes in another context that he was thrilled and made restless by Dead-Christ, a painting by Paul Reubens (Phukan, 2012, pp. 69) The poet has used Christ as metaphor of the distressed in several poems.

In poem number 23 entitled I enter in to realm of all white included in his Nityarata Prithivi, the poet synthesizes the thought of a painting with dexterity. It is a wall painting of fresco design found at cave number 17 at Ajanta. About this painting it has been said –

“Lord Buddha came out for begging. The body of the God and Goddess are painted relatively in deep colour than the ordinary mortals. The difference in shape was one of the salient features of man. Anyone was blessed to have Buddha at his household. A mother (may be Yoshodhara) asks her son (may be Rahul) to keep outdoor so that he can give alms to Buddha without fail.”

One can not imagine the restlessness in the eyes of the mother in her eagerness to give alms and to see Lord Buddha (Mitra, 2000, P. 57).

In this poem, the pang concerns the contradictory view arising out of his venture to bring an almost unearthly entity into human fabric as subject. He has the drill to write poems covering the endless sufferings of man. However, he cannot do anything to do away with the sufferings. Such a feeling has been expressed in the poem, while associating it with the painting.

In the poem arrived at Indrasabha at noon (poem number 8, included in the Nitrarata Prithivi), there is the mental illustration of the poet soon after he saw the caves in Ellora. Indrasabha (cave number 32) is the most beautiful and two-storied cave in Ellora (Leicht, p. 94). Apart from the highly furnished lotus, there are idols of Jaksha, Matanga and Indra, the king of the gods. There is an idol of Ambika, the wife of Neminath, a Jaksha. Kailash is the name of cave number 16 of this cluster, which is also called Kailash temple. The kailash mountain of Lord Siva has been depicted here. There is a giant idol of Lord Siva carved out of a huge stone. The names of these caves are explicitly mentioned in the poem. Again, the dancing postures of Lord Siva have been carved out in the cave called Dasavatar. Goddess Durga in her destroying mode in cave number 27, the Buddha idol in cave number 1, 6 and 10, the idols of woman at cave number 22, are some of the caves that draw people’s attention. Though there is no basic literal difference between Indrasabha and Devalok, both the caves have been differentiated in their polarity.

However, Phukan does not have many poems that capture the association of historic paintings. It is true that his observation of such paintings has indirectly influenced in the formation of the pictorial body of his po-
Edvard Munch, has become numerous screams in many poems. A direct reflection of this can be found in "Outcry," a poem included in his book *Aru Ki Noishabda (And What Quietude)*. 

The outcry of emptiness
Past and present fell
Far off distances in night
The outcry of the fox.

It is remarkable to mention that past and present is deemed to fall into far off night in the second stanza because a mystery is created in the first stanza by various spitals made on red bases.

The poet ventures to understand Nilpawan Baruah, a painter, through his poem "I entered the sleeping room" (Poem No. 22: *Kavita*), which is dedicated to Baruah. In the poem there is touching reference to the *Cypress Tree, Starry Night, Sun-flower and Cross over the Wheat-field*, some of the well-known paintings of Van Gogh. Yellow, orange and blue, the prominent colours used by Van Gogh in paintings, have been carefully used by the poet to create certain dimension. ‘*A blue moving star*’ in the poem is nothing but reflective of the uneven surface created the various spitals in the painting. At the same time, the poem illustrates diverse feelings of the poet inspired by the tones in the paintings of Van Gogh.

A cow runs fast over the houses (Poem No. 37: *Kavita*), a poem dedicated to Samiran Baruah, a painter, is directly inspired by Marc Chagall, a famous Russian painter. The simplicity and the innocence of the children, a salient feature in Chagall, are evident in the poem. The cows flying through the sky, flying men ready to kiss, a cow-faced body playing guitar with a lady upon the shoulder, a couple upon the back of the fowl etc are some of the elements in the paintings of Chagall, which seem to be apparently absurd. Chagall’s paintings can be criticized from the point of drawing. So, those paintings are similar in status with the child paintings. However, the causeless joy expressed in Chagall’s paintings is the eternal joy searched by the soul of man. The imagination that the characters in the painting enjoy at the second anniversary of Chagall makes the poem very alluring.

In Phukan’s poetry, the expressions of many painters can be unearthed. There is a poem based on *Crows over the Wheat-field*, a painting by Vincent Van Gogh, which has been included in his *Nirjanatar Sabda (The Sound of Silence)*. Along with the poem, the painting is also printed. Phukan has three complete poems to his credit that capture as subjects Paul Cezanne, Vincent Van Gogh etc. Moreover, his being a student of history, the historic works have effects upon his vision of poetry. He is very aware of this aspect in his poetry. One of the aspects of his poetry is his handkerking after the paintings. On occasions, his poems appear to be garland of images. Apparently, though there is no link among the poems, they are yoked together by an internal sense of reasoning and order. Therefore, almost at all occasions each of his poems becomes a moving, uninterrupted and somewhat complex picture as well. Moreover, he has said to his readers that a unity in thought is prevalent among his cluster of poems, which makes it inevitable to find out the links in the images seemingly dissimilar in various poems. Though they are similar in use, they are dissimilar from the source of the images in view.

That he was enriched by modern art is exemplified by his first wave of poems. Amrita Sher Gill, a poem included in his first poetry collection captures Phukan’s encounter with Amrita Sher Gill’s painting. The paintings fails to take a metaphorical shape while passing through the vision of the poet in this wave of poems. However, the impact of Amrita Sher Gill has been directly expressed through his poems. The poet has felt his soul’s presence among the paintings of Sher Gill. But, this relationship is not so clear to him. Amrita Sher Gill, who is of Indo-European origin, is famous for her self-portraits is also known for her *Haldi Grinders, Woman on Charpui, Three women, Unfinished paintings, Banana Seller, The camel, Elephant Promenade* etc. While referring to various paintings of Sher Gill, the poet dwells on his mental state created by them in this poem. It is remarkable that Sher Gill becomes *a cry far off* in this poem. The agony Phukan discovers in the paintings of Sher Gill is very touching. Though he says that the language of paintings cannot be transferred to poetry, yet such an attempt is perceptible in this poem.

One bird, one angel, a poem included in his *Aru Ki Nai-shabda, (And What Quietude)* is inspired by *An oldman with an unknown bird,* a painting by Bhabesh Chandra Sanyal. About the salient feature of the painting, Phukan has written in the appendix of the book, 23 which covers his analysis of the poem too. In his search after truth, Nilamoni Phukan is much enriched by the ingrained thoughts embodied in a painting. ‘The mystery of the universe’ is what is expressed through the colour-outlay, subject matter, and body language of the painting. The bird that heralds this message to the ear of the old man appears to the angel here. This bird can be considered as the *long sleep in the eyes of the men in trance.*

That he has been influenced by paintings is much established by some of his poems, specifically in the middle of several poems. *The Scream,* a famous painting by Edvard Munch, has become numerous screams in many
Gogh and Marc Chagall. These poems have been dedicated to three prominent painters in Assam, namely Atul Barua, Nilpawan Barua and Samiran Barua. In his poem two households there were under the same roof, the image from Shiver Bishpan, a painting by Nandalal Bose, has been used. Again there is a direct reflection of Saturn devouring one of his son, a painting by Francisco Jose de Goyay, in Nobody is here – the child or the old man of Phukan. However, the poem does not dwell on the painting. Rather, it is an analysis of the tyranny in social life, doubt, the early death of humanity.

Colour Consciousness
His interest in paintings has created special awareness about colours in this poetry. About the role or importance of colour in paintings and poetry Phukan has written –

“Like the words, colours have the same capability to evoke emotions, anxiety, excitement and association. A tune which is otherwise not expressed by words is most probably easy to be captured in colours. Due to this fact, form and colour are probably predominant in modern painting. Lines are almost divorced from painting. The primary and mixed colours of yellow, red, orange, green, blue, brown etc have symbolic meanings and conjectures depending on social time, social place and cultural differences as well. Though not instant in purport, the painter, through the medium of variety and contradiction in colours, for and contrary characters, harmony, light and dark tone, dimension and variations in colours, creates a rhythm which we cannot hear, but understand by the mind. Except images and metaphors, the poet cannot take anything directly from painting…”

Like a piece of painting, a poem cannot be narrated, but felt. The poetry is emotion-based, the painting is form-based in nature. The form in a poem is born out of emotion, the emotions in painting is born from forms. There is no painting that does not carry any emotion; there is no poem that does not have metaphors and images (Phukan, 2013, p. 52).

In the quoted words, Phukan delineates the importance of colour in poetry and paintings. However, like the paintings the colours in poetry cannot be seen. In poetry words indicate colours. In poetry, the readers discover a world of colour of their own on the basis of the words used. From this perspective, the colours in poetry are more dimensional and meaningful than those in paintings. For example, the very word ‘yellow’ does not evoke the same meanings among all the readers. It may mean yellow as the flowers of the mustard, red like the orange, deep brown like the gold, or something that may indicate the green. In painting, the painter sets a colour permanently. It is not the job of the poet. As a result, the colour epithets used in poetry become more meaningful and significant than those used in paintings.

From the contexts referred to, a reader can understand how much Nilamoni Phukan is influenced by various colours, shades used in paintings. No Assamese poets before or his times is seen to have been influenced by colours like him. However, he is not enriched by modern paintings alone, in his formation of colour consciousness in poetry.

After all, Nilamoni Phukan has used various elements of paintings as associations in his poetry. Apart from writing poems directly dwelling on paintings of several painters, Phukan has successfully transferred some perspectives of paintings into useful language. The abstractness in paintings has been transferred in solidity into poetry. Here, his language of poetry has taken a concrete form too. At the same time, he has used the significance of colours as significant in poetry. In times, he has shown his dexterity by writing poems on the sheer power of images. In this way, his use of the nature and language of paintings can be analyzed in various dimensions.

The Poetics of Nilamoni Phukan as Pictorial Expressions of Experiences
The perspective of imparting pictorial quality to human experiences in poetry by Nilamoni Phukan is remarkable. There are some human experiences depicted with visual quality relating to paintings in his poetry. Some of them are:

a) The whim of wind over the water ( Drishya : Aru Ki Naishabda/ Scene: And What Quietude) : The nature is personified here.

b) The hard brightness on the body of the buffalo grazing ( Grishmar keitaman Khrudrakai drishya : Aru Ki Noishabda) : hardness is imparted to life and movement

c) Blood oozes out if the leaves are squeezed ( Poem No. 30 : Kait Aru Golap Aru Kait/Thorns And Roses And Thorns) : imaginary piece of painting arising out of encounter. Personification.

d) Night as cool as the face of the Moon ( Poem No. 6 : Nritrarata Prithivi/ The Dancing Earth ) : abstract textile borne out of synthesis of sensations

e) A slide of yellow laughed out ( Poem No.7 : Nritrarata Prithivi/ The Dancing Earth) : Sensations have gained a textile

f) A butterfly lying over the thorny wire ( Poem No.7 : Nritrarata Prithivi/ The Dancing Earth) : association of inhuman treatment against the Nature

g) Death-like brightness ( Brahmaputra Surjyasta : Aru ki Noishabda/ Sunset on Brahmaputra: And
Assamese poetry. These examples. Such a synthesis is rare to be found in

Feelings, sensuous and beyond, have been captured in these examples. Such a synthesis is rare to be found in Assamese poetry.

Conclusion

There is difference between movement in painting and movement in poetry as concepts. In his poem named A flock of Crows in wheat-field Nilamoni Phukan puts his visual experiences of a painting by same title of Van Gogh. However, this poem differs from other poems of the same category written by the poet. The poem written by X J Kennedy on the basis of Nude descending a staircase, a painting by Marcel Duchamp, is one of the outstanding modern poems. The visual experiences of the paintings of Duchamp has been uplifted to internal experience of kennedy. The continuous movement of the character in the cubist painting has become an emotional experience in intense sensuous form in the poem. The greatness of kennedy lies in his effort to transfer the abstract thought of a painting to a concrete human experience in poetry. The concept of ‘nothing on nor on her mind’ in the poem is peerless. So is the peerless lady in the fountain. However, the repetitive nature of the painting is absent in the poem. This is but a proof of how to transfer one medium in to another. In the above mentioned poem, Phukan has transferred the pictorial aspect of the painting of Vincent Van Gogh into poetic form.

A minute observation of the expressions in paintings and its relation with nature is but a meditation done through pictures. Phukan has carved a language for himself while treading on both the ways. So, the pieces of the poems mentioned above are like certain pieces of paintings. One of the prime aims of his poetry is to impart pictorial quality to what is non-existential and formless in nature. His vision of painting is much coloured by various modern movement and schools in modern painting. The influence of Impressionism and somewhat non-impressionism is more in him. He has used the language of blank canvas in his poetry. So, wherever Phukan remains silent, the poem becomes all vocal.

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